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Although they are not yet recognized by their government as adults, free to vote and be responsible for their actions, Amish teens are considered adults in the church by the age of 16 and must decide whether to stay or to leave the world they know.

Despite their outward appearance, Amish children are not yet members of the Amish Church. The Amish religion is an Anabaptist religion, meaning they do not baptize until adulthood, when an individual can make his or her own decision.

According to Brad Igou of the Amish Country News, "At the age of 16, Amish youth begin the period of their life known as 'rumspringa'." Rumspringa, which means "running around time" in the Pennsylvania German dialect, is a period in the life of an Amish teen where he must make the decision to join the church. During this time they are permitted to flirt with the world around them and explore the English world before making their decision.

Isaac, a 17-year-old Amish teen of Leola, reported, "We are allowed to try new things to get it out of our system before joining the church." If the adolescent decides to stay, they must obey the Ordnung, or Amish law. This does not allow followers of the Amish religion to hold certain jobs, wear modern clothing, marry outside of the religion or enjoy modern conveniences. If they decide to leave, they are not shunned or excommunicated. They may begin their new lives and still be a part of their family. It is only if they are baptized and later break that vow that they could then be shunned. "There is no age limit, but generally in the late teens, early 20s (and not before that) is the decision made," explained Igou.

When an adolescent reaches the rumspringa period, they join groups of other teens known as "crowds." According to a current estimate, there are about 25 crowds in Lancaster County. These crowds range from very conservative to very liberal. An Amish teen must decide where he or she fits. "I equate them (crowds) to high school, where one goes with the group who has the same interests and value system," Igou said. Teens do not have to stay within their neighborhood or church when joining a crowd, Igou said. The activities each crowd enjoys varies.

"Amish youth may enjoy hymn sings, sports, courting, car rides, movies, trips to the beach or the mountains and much more,'' explained Diane Raymond of the Amish Farm and House Museum. "Which crowd you are in decides what you do. The more conservative attend hymn sings and sports whereas the liberal explore the outside world." The main thing that changes during rumspringa is that teens are now allowed to date. Socializing with the opposite sex is not something done before this time.

"I attended singings; there, I met my boyfriend. We go to hymn singings together, as well as walks, buggy rides with other couples and just spend time getting to know each other better," reported Rebecca, a 16-year-old Amish teen from Intercourse.

Isaac belongs to a more liberal group. "We drive cars (though I don't own my own), go to the movies, we went to Maryland to see the ocean, we have parties as well." Isaac added, "Nothing too crazy."

Many Amish teens have jobs outside of the home to fund their new way of life.

"I have a job building lawn furniture. I use some of my earnings for going out, but most of the time I am saving for my future," Isaac said.

According to Igou, many of the young men pursue jobs in construction, while the young women often look for restaurant and cleaning work.

"In general, some in the Amish community may feel that working with 'English' can have some negative influences, but in our area it is perhaps more common," Igou said. "People have different opinions and experiences."

Just like in modern America, some Amish adolescents rebel and test their boundaries with drugs, alcohol and sex.

"We stereotype the Amish as having no faults. Their society is not immune to drugs or alcohol," Igou said. In the late 1990s, America was stunned when two young Amish men were arrested for drug-related crimes. The two young men received the drugs from a Pagan biker group. They were later prosecuted.

"Amish parents are not unlike modern parents, they do not know everything there children are doing," reported Igou. Since the incident, Amish parents took notice and there was much discussion in the Amish community as to what to do to prevent it from happening again. "Since 1996 parents have become more involved in the rumspringa period," Raymond said.

In order to join the church, one must learn about the religion and understand the Ordnung. If a teen decides to join the church, they then " make a solemn vow before man and God," according to Raymond.

Many Amish teens believe the rumspring period strengthens their commitment to the church.

"In the beginning, I was so excited about exploring the other world. Now that I have seen a bit of it, I am satisfied and will make my decision soon," said Isaac.

Rebecca, like many girls, didn't go wild during the rumspringa stage. Rebecca said, "I know what I want, it was never a question to me."

Marriage and family is usually a key factor in the decision to stay or to go. "The parents are now encouraging the girls to join sooner so the boys will follow," explained Raymond. "It would be incredibly difficult to leave the life you know and start over. "

"Though there are no exact figures, in our area it appears upwards of 90 percent stay," Igou said. According to Igou, it has been noted "the Amish population doubles about every 23 years. You could probably argue that it is one of the fastest growing religions in America."

Many of the Amish teens value the choice given to them by the church. "The decision is ours and ours alone," said Igou. "I know people wonder how we could decide to live like we do, without automobiles and electricity. To be honest, I wonder how the English can live with them. The wonderful thing is, it is our choice."

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